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Gone, But Where?

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Gone, but Where?

When someone leaves us for another job, another place to live, or to make a visit, he or she goes someplace else. Usually, we like to know where people have gone, especially when we have relationships with them. When someone dies, he or she has certainly left us, but where do those who have died go? The answer matters to us, the more we care about those who have departed this life.

Easy enough to say that those who have died have gone to Heaven, but that might not satisfy us as a sufficient answer. When someone we know moves to another city that we have not visited, we can at least read about the place, and talk with those who have been there. Though much is in print about Heaven, we cannot buy a guidebook, view a photo album, or speak with recent visitors who can tell us about Heaven from their personal experiences.

We are so used to moving from one place to another, that we naturally think first of those who have died as having gone to another place. What if they have left us, but have not gone to another place? If Heaven is the name of a place, a location which has no email, no cell-phones, and no "snail-mail," those who have gone there are completely absent from us. But such a possibility does not make complete sense to us, and surely does not satisfy us in grieving our losses.

When people move away, rarely do they go to an absolute hermitage or to a completely isolated desert island. Wherever they go, they will associate with other persons, even if those persons are strangers at first, and even if they are members of another culture who speak a different language. What if those who have died have moved from regular interaction with us, but are now received into a wholly involving interpersonal relationship with God, with God who is present to us and in whom those who have died now live?

We might find it helpful, when thinking of those we know who have died, to reflect on a possible exchange to the question, "Where have they gone" with another: "To whom have they gone?" As we consider some possibilities, we want to avoid "either/or" and give more attention to "both/and." We do not need to think of those with whom we have once been able to have face-to-face conversations in this life, as, after their death, now being in an exclusive relationship with God, thereby leaving us completely bereft of any form of presence with them.

Whether or not some of us have experiences of communication with one or other person who has died, most of us know what it is to feel the pain of loss

that arises because we have loved, and continue to love. It makes no sense at all to think that those who have died no longer love us. We have more in common with them after their death than we did before, if we consider that they are with God, who is Love, and in whose presence we live right now. But our communion with those who have left this life is almost entirely, for most of us, about bonds of love, rather than communication of thoughts, words, and concepts.

At any time of our choosing, we can muse over possible answers to the heavenly question: "Gone, but where?"